

is—you can't know what it might do! You don't even know that it helped you."

Lowry pulled back his shirt to show the bruises on his shoulder.

"A seven-fingered hand made those marks. The creature out there has a hand with seven-fingers, and it was on the spot when I went down. What if it isn't human? I've got to give it shelter."

Gail shivered. "But it's a sea-creature, Bruce! Why should it want inside the dome?"

"It's no sea-beast," Lowry said patiently. "It's something from Outside, Gail. Maybe the pilot of the ship that crashed in the plankton beds. It's tougher than we are or it couldn't have lasted this long out there in the howler, but nothing can take that sort of punishment forever. It wants shelter."

Marvin Pascal said forcibly, "I won't allow that brute in the dome, Lowry. If you won't consider your own wife's safety—"

"It wouldn't have helped me if it had been hostile," Lowry cut him off. "I'm going to let it in. If you don't feel safe you can lock yourself in your bedroom."

Pascal moved back, his face working with temper. "I warn you, Lowry, I won't permit it!"

Lowry ignored him and went to the port. He had to raise his head a little to look up into the alien face outside.

"I can't open the port," he said. "The wind would turn the dome inside out. You'll have to come around to the rear entrance, where you left me."

It slid aside and was gone from the glass. Gail's stifled cry reenforced the chill that prickled Lowry's scalp: "Bruce, it *understood* you!"

Walt Griswold let out his breath shakily. "She's right, Bruce. You know what that means?"

"I know," Lowry said, and wondered if he did. "It means that the thing is intelligent. Probably a hell of a lot more intelligent than we are."

He saw then that Pascal had left the common room, but he had no time to

wonder where the big man had gone.

The port alarm over his communications desk rang stridently. Lowry turned on it in frozen disbelief, and found the bulb under the clamorous bell glowing redly. A rush of damp air whispered up from the storage level, bringing with it the powerful bass howl of the storm.

"It's keener than we thought," Lowry said. "It didn't wait for us—it's let itself in."

**H**E RAN for the lower level stairwell, throwing an order back to Walt Griswold: "Close the port and stay with Gail and Nadine. I'll go down and check."

He had reached the foot of the stairway when Pascal came out of the crawler garage. The big man had taken a hand gun from his machine, a heavy lead-pellet belt pistol of a type used against smaller Venusian land animals.

"I warned you," Pascal said. "When it comes inside under the lights I'm going to kill it."

He worked the slide that threw the weapon into firing order. His eyes watched the dark garage doorway warily, their stare curiously bright and fixed.

"Put the gun away," Lowry ordered. "The thing is inside already—you fool, do you want to get us all killed?"

The alien came out of the darkness of the crawler garage and stood in the full glare of overhead light, its single seven-fingered hand raised toward them.

It had changed shape greatly during the short time elapsed. Lowry had a disturbed impression of a squat bipedal body without tendrils or flippers, its dripping skin glistening with the raw, wet pinkness of a freshly-skinned carcass. Its round red eyes stared without blinking, mirroring the play of thought as alien as its outlandish form.

Pascal opened fire without warning.

The storeroom racketed to the sound, explosions reverberating deafening from metal walls. Lowry cried out in horror and ran at Pascal, knocking up his arm.